

An examination of the anti-immigrant campaign in early 20th century America

The Guarded Gate, by Daniel Okrent (Scribner, 2019)

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Daniel Okrent's book *The Guarded Gate* examines the decades-long campaign in the US to restrict immigration that led to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, legislation which established a quota system designed to virtually bar immigration to the US from Southern and Eastern Europe. A century later, at a time when xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism are once again on the rise in the US and around the world, much of this history is little known.

The four decades leading up to the Johnson-Reed Act had witnessed the greatest wave of immigration to the United States in the country's history up to that point. More than 25 million Europeans, increasingly from Southern and Eastern Europe, flocked to the US during this period. Asians were largely barred, primarily by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

This was a time of an enormous expansion of American capitalism and with it the class struggle, as illustrated by such events as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Haymarket affair and frame-up of 1886. In the aftermath of the Civil War and with the end of Reconstruction, a period of political reaction set in, bringing with it new expressions of racism and xenophobia, including campaigns against immigration.

The Immigration Restriction League (IRL) was founded in 1894 by several young graduates of Harvard, members in good standing of Boston's elite, who could trace their lineage back to the 17th century, if not to the Mayflower itself. Prescott Hall, one of the founders, was president of the IRL for 25 years. Hall was indefatigable in promulgating his racist views. According to him, "Hebrews [were] an Asiatic race," and southern Italians were African because of the "negroid migration from Carthage."

The IRL drew upon the considerable financial resources of its closest supporters. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (whose son would run for vice president alongside Richard Nixon in 1960) was a very prominent supporter and spokesman in Washington. When Lodge first introduced legislation to restrict immigration in 1896, he read a poem on the Senate floor by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, from which Daniel Okrent drew the title of his book. The poem, written in response to Emma Lazarus's famous inscription on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor..."), ended with the following lines:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng...
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn...
Accents of menace alien to our air...
O Liberty, white Goddess! Is it well
To leave the gates unguarded?...

Lodge and his co-thinkers were not subtle in their arguments. In the same speech, the senator said that his proposal for a literacy test for admission to the US "will bear most heavily upon the Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians and Asiatics, and very lightly, or not at all, upon English-speaking emigrants." He continued, "[H]istory teaches us if a lower race mixes with a higher in sufficient numbers... the lower race will prevail."

Running parallel to increasing efforts to restrict immigration was the development of the pseudo-science of eugenics. The term was first coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton was a brilliant scientist. He was also a believer in racial separatism and white superiority.

"Scientific racism," in the form of the thoroughly anti-scientific claim that "desirable" traits are inheritable and that "selective breeding" could improve the human species, became the rage in ruling class circles in the first three decades of the 20th century, on both sides of the Atlantic. As we shall see, the Nazi dictatorship in Germany enthusiastically welcomed the work of the eugenicists.

Among the most prominent of the "scientific racists" and promoters of their arguments were Charles Davenport, the head of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island; Madison Grant, who was trained as a lawyer but devoted himself primarily to zoology, and who was one of the founders of the world-famous Bronx Zoo; and H. Fairfield Osborn, a famous paleontologist and geologist, who was Grant's closest friend and was for 25 years the president of the board of trustees of the American Museum of Natural History.

Davenport's main contribution to the cause was the founding of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in 1910. He developed a detailed study called *The Trait Book*, a massive collection of 3,500 human attributes and defects. In just the first seven years of the ERO's operations, Okrent explains, it accumulated more than half a million index cards that described individual subjects, not only with respect to obviously genetic traits like hair color, but also including such characteristics and descriptions as "mythomaniacal," "rattle-brained" and "whining," and special abilities like penmanship. This was all supposed to aid in a future program of selective breeding.

Grant, who was a close friend of presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover, did the most to ally xenophobia with eugenics. He became well known as the author of *The Passing of the Great Race*. The book, published in 1915, exalted the so-called "Nordic" race of Northern and Western Europe as "the white man par excellence," superior to the "Alpines" and the "Mediterraneans" of Central and Southern Europe. On the last page of his book, Grant warned, "The maudlin sentimentalism that has made America 'an asylum for the oppressed'" is "sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss."

This is only a small sample of the vitriolic racism and pseudo-scientific quackery that permeated the efforts of the anti-immigration forces and received the backing of dominant sections of the ruling class. Racism and xenophobia did not arise from the masses of working people, but were formulated and relentlessly promoted by the ruling elite.

Every president expressed sympathy for the work of the racist xenophobes. When Grant's book was published, Roosevelt immediately sent him a letter of congratulation. Davenport was largely funded by Mary Harriman, the widow of rail tycoon E. H. Harriman and the mother of the future Democratic governor of New York, W. Averell Harriman. *The Passing of the Great Race* was the subject of a laudatory two-page spread in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Others who praised it included Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Villard was at that time the owner of the *Nation*.

In the Progressive Era, certain measures of capitalist reform and regulation went hand in hand with support for eugenics and immigration restriction. Many of the eugenics leaders were also conservation advocates. Underlying the unity among these various elements was American nationalism, as the US emerged as an imperialist power.

Among the supporters of restrictive measures were birth control advocate Margaret Sanger and Booker T. Washington, the conservative African-American leader who advocated "self-reliance" instead of a struggle against Jim Crow segregation. Right-wing "business union" leader Samuel Gompers, himself an immigrant, also backed racist exclusion measures.

Leading the opponents of eugenics was the famous German-born anthropologist Franz Boas. For much of this period, Boas was outnumbered by adherents of "scientific racism."

Support for restrictions grew as the wave of immigration continued. In the 1890s, the total number of immigrants was 3.7 million. That shot up to 7.6 million in the first decade of the 20th century.

Despite the widespread sympathy they won in establishment circles, the restrictionists did not make much headway until the years of World War I. They finally secured literacy tests in the 1917 Immigration Act, and a 1921 law was another step in the closing of the "unguarded gate."

The major turning point came with the 1924 act, co-sponsored by Congressman Albert Johnson from the state of Washington and Senator David Reed from Pennsylvania. Johnson was particularly well equipped to shepherd this vicious law through Congress. A supporter of the Ku Klux Klan, he was known for his violent denunciations of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which was very active in the Pacific Northwest.

The Johnson-Reed Act effectively stopped immigration from Asia while setting an overall annual quota of 160,000 for all countries outside of the Western Hemisphere. This total was in turn divided according to the number of foreign-born persons of a given nationality counted in the 1890 census. The act simply ignored more recent census figures in order to ensure that virtually no immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, particularly Italians and Jews, would be accepted.

In 1914, before the world war, 1.2 million Europeans had settled in the US. After the 1921 law, this figure dropped to 368,000. In 1924 it was reduced further, to the 160,000 figure.

These numbers, as Okrent shows, do not provide the whole picture, because, exactly as designed, the "quotas within the quota" came down most heavily on Southern and Eastern Europe, without explicitly using racial or ethnic criteria. The former Russian Empire sent about 189,000 emigrants in 1921. The figure for that area after 1924, then encompassing the Soviet Union, Lithuania and Poland, was 7,346. Italian immigration was reduced even more drastically over this same period, from 222,000 to 2,662.

The Johnson-Reed Act had devastating consequences over the next 40 years. Although it was superseded by the notorious Immigration and

Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act) in 1952, the quota system remained in place until new legislation in 1965. Well before that, however, the door was shut to refugees fleeing fascism and the looming Second World War.

Okrent notes the well-known "Voyage of the Damned" in 1939, when the SS *St. Louis*, carrying more than 900 refugees from the Nazis, was denied entry to the US because Germany's immigration quota had already been filled.

Hundreds of thousands more, from among the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust as well as others, were similarly prevented from fleeing to safety. Anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant racism more generally, were dominant within the ruling class, as also evidenced by quota systems at universities and other institutions, until World War II brought a shift toward democratic rhetoric and official disapproval of most open displays of bigotry.

The biggest weakness of *The Guarded Gate* lies in the questions that it does not pose. Okrent's largely empirical account is informative, but does not suffice. The issues cannot be understood divorced from the class struggle in the US and internationally. Virtually the only mention of the labor movement in the book is the reference to the reactionary role of Gompers.

Why were racism and anti-Semitism on the rise in the early 20th century, including and especially within elite and intellectual circles in the US? Why were the advocates of restrictive immigration unable to obtain any of their major goals until the eve of US entry into World War I? What were the reasons for the overwhelming support for the 1924 law, as well as the transformed immigration system set in place in 1965? And finally, why the return today to xenophobic demagoguery and proposals similar to those of a century ago?

These are admittedly huge issues, which can only begin to be addressed within the scope of this article. The advance and self-confidence of American capitalism a century ago were accompanied by an intensification of the class struggle. Big business sought cheap labor and saw advantages in pitting the native-born against the immigrant. Sections of the ruling elite resisted calls for immigration limits. This explains the several presidential vetoes of bills passed by Congress during this period.

At the same time, anti-immigrant sentiment continued to be encouraged, and there were no divisions of principle between the different sides of the debate within the ruling class.

The shift to support for immigration restriction that took place during and after the First World War is more fully discussed in the valuable book by Tom Mackaman, *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924*. It was in part a response to the "Great Migration" of African-Americans to the North, fleeing Jim Crow oppression and seeking employment in the expanding industrial sector. Later, this was amplified by the returning veterans after the war, and also the internal migration from Appalachia to the industrial Midwest, sharply reducing the need for immigrant labor.

At the same time, and most decisively, amidst the wave of strikes and labor militancy of the 1916-1919 period, business interests feared an influx of immigrants influenced by the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the collapse of the defeated German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. American workers had already demonstrated their combativity in bitter struggles and the growth of basic industry portended far greater class conflict.

This was not a purely American phenomenon. The anti-immigrant campaign took place within the context of the political upheaval on every continent. The Russian Revolution, the first successful workers' revolution in history, set an example for workers everywhere. The bourgeoisie reacted with fear and counterrevolutionary violence.

The Johnson-Reed Act was part of this wave of global reaction after the war. It was preceded by the infamous Palmer Raids, the mass arrests of

thousands of immigrant workers, hundreds of whom were deported, in November 1919 and January 1920, organized by A. Mitchell Palmer, President Woodrow Wilson's attorney general. The year 1921 saw the arrest and frame-up of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts. Many mob attacks on immigrant workers took place during this period.

The best elements of the socialist movement and the fledgling Communist Party fought on the basis of an international perspective to unite the working class. In both Europe and the US, the ruling classes turned toward nationalism and repression, preparing for another and even more devastating war, which was to break out within two decades. Far-right nativism and fascism were promoted, with Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party taking power in Germany and adopting the terror methods that led to the Holocaust.

The Nazis enthusiastically welcomed the work of the American eugenics advocates. Adolf Hitler said of *The Passing of the Great Race*, "The book is my Bible." In *Mein Kampf*, published a year after the Johnson-Reed Act became law, Hitler described the US as the "one state in which at least weak beginnings toward a better conception of [citizenship] are noticeable," including "simply excluding certain races from naturalization."

The return to a policy of open immigration after 1965 reflected the needs of American capitalism as the post-World War II economic boom began to unravel. The American working class remained powerful and militant, even if it was politically disarmed by the treacherous labor bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO. New opportunities for cheap labor were now seized, as big business sought to pit immigrants against native-born workers.

The immigration reform of 1965 coincided with other reform measures, including the landmark civil rights legislation. The elimination of the openly racist and exclusionary quotas dating from 1924 was necessary if American imperialism, in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, was to present a "democratic" face to the world.

These policies in turn set in motion other far-reaching changes. The American working class has been transformed over the past five decades, as immigration has dwarfed even the numbers of 1880–1924.

There is much to learn from the earlier period. As in the past, today's anti-immigration campaign has intensified in tandem with capitalist crisis. Xenophobia and racism have been relentlessly promoted in the period since the 2008 financial crash.

Trump's vicious scapegoating of immigrants exceeds even that of the anti-immigration forces of the past. The Democrats, as shown by the massive deportations of undocumented immigrants under Obama, share responsibility for whipping up xenophobia, even as they pretend otherwise. Moreover, their promotion of identity politics serves to divide the working class, complementing and encouraging the racists.

The same *New York Times* that boosted Madison Grant's racist tract *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1915 today produces the "1619 Project," promoting a racist interpretation of American history and repudiating the legacy of the American Revolution and the Civil War. What unites these seemingly opposed views is a racial view of history and a deliberate policy of sowing and exacerbating divisions in the working class.

The ruling class cannot rule without fomenting such divisions, and as a new wave of struggle develops today, it seeks with increasing ferocity to stoke up racial and national tensions. As in the past, this is the product of a global capitalist crisis that threatens global war, and along with it the prospect of social revolution.

Today's crisis is indeed far deeper and more closely interconnected than that of the period described by *The Guarded Gate*. World war and fascism are threatened once again, and pose the need for the overthrow of decaying capitalism. The international working class is coming forward and the lessons of this history must be learned. In the US, the multi-ethnic

and multi-racial working class that has taken shape in the last several generations must be united in opposition to the poison of nationalism, whether it comes in the form of Trump's fascistic rhetoric or the nationalism and identity politics of the Democrats.



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